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CHILD LABOR IN THE SOUTH

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The South is a part of the nation. Its industrial development has not been unlike that of America as a whole, except that it had a new beginning thirty years ago. The child labor system is an abnormal and, let us hope, temporary phase of industrialism, whose origin and history have been much alike in the South and in the older manufacturing states of both America and Europe. In general, wherever an industry admits of the labor of children with profit, there children are employed until their exploitation is forbidden by law. There are large fields of manufacturing and mechanical industry where the labor of children is unprofitable, if not impossible. In the newer commonwealths, both of the west and southwest, child labor does not exist to an appreciable extent, and it is impossible, on account of the high wage scale for the adult, to establish those industries that do employ children on a large scale. With the growth of cities, and the poverty inseparable from over-crowding of the population, the employment of children in the street trades becomes a serious evil, whether in the South or elsewhere.

But there are certain industries in which the application of steam or electrical power to machinery minimizes the necessity for adult brawn, while the very perfection of the machinery renders less needful the skill and the intelligence of the adult hand and brain. In these industries there always have been found multitudes of children employed, until there was restriction or prohibition by law. In the older manufacturing states the evil has long been recognized, and its control effected or attempted, according to the ease or difficulty with which public opinion translates itself into remedial legislation. In the newer manufacturing states the evil grows apace, until it becomes conspicuous enough to arouse public sentiment in behalf of the little victims of the system, and the slow process begins of restricting their employment by legislation and the slower process of enforcing the laws.

Now it happens that the southern states are new manufacturing states. It happens also that the most conspicuous manufacturing industry in the South, the manufacture of cotton, is one of the industries, all whose traditions, both in England and New England, pointed to the wholesale employment of children. The extraordinary growth of cotton manufacturing in the South, from 1,819,291 spindles in 1890 to 6,267,163 in 1900 and to 11,250,000 spindles in 1910, according to a recent estimate of Colonel Hester, of the New Orleans Stock Exchange, has brought about a pressing demand for labor, in a section of the country rather thinly populated, a demand that has thus far only been supplied with native white labor, with no appreciable aid from immigration. The low price of raw cotton, in the decade ending with 1900, and the consequent unprofitableness of cotton farming, resulted in a large emigration to the mill villages, from the tenant farms and from the mountain regions, where it was easy for the cotton mill agents to persuade the people of the better living conditions at the mills. These causes in combination have served to lift the South to the bad eminence it occupies, in the matter of child labor. The census of 1900 shows that "to a greater extent than any other mechanical or manufacturing industry, the cotton mill is the employer of children." It also shows that "the proportion which children ten to fifteen years of age formed of the total number of cotton mill operatives in 1900 is almost three times as great in the southern states as it is in the northern and western. In the North, about one cotton mill operative out of every ten was ten to fifteen years of age, while in the South the corresponding figures were about three out of every ten. Not only do the cotton mills of the South employ more children in proportion to the total number of operatives, but they employ a relatively larger number of younger children."¹

Extent of Child Labor in the South

According to a recent estimate, the South now possesses, in round numbers, \$20,000,000,000 in property. Of this amount, ten per cent only, or \$2,000,000,000, is invested in manufacturing industries. As to the variety of these industries there are comparatively few in the nation that are not represented in the South of the present day. The lumber industry holds first place in the value of its products,

¹See Census Bulletin, 69.

with an annual output of \$365,000,000. A few children between the ages of fourteen and sixteen are employed in this industry, but under fourteen they are scarcely ever desired or allowed. For example, the census of manufactures, 1905, reports for the textile mills of North Carolina, 9,215 children under sixteen; for the lumber industry, including the furniture factories, 571. As we shall see, both of these estimates are underestimates, but they are relatively correct. The same authority gives 1,289 children employed in the tobacco and cigar factories. But among the other miscellaneous industries of the state none employed as many as a hundred children.

The cotton mill industry stands next to the lumber industry, with 841 mills in the South to-day, and eleven and a quarter million spindles. The cotton mill is only one of the textile group, which is represented also in the South by about 100 woolen mills, a score of silk mills and a dozen jute mills. In all these industries children are employed to a degree only less than that of their employment in the cotton mills.

The tobacco and cigar factories of Virginia, North Carolina and Florida are also the employers of children on a large scale. In Tampa, Florida, alone, the number of children employed grew in two years from a few score to 2,000, the few children of the Cuban and Spanish cigar-makers being increased by large numbers of native children, whose parents brought them as apprentices to the factories that they might receive the high wages still paid in that industry. The evil grew so suddenly that the people of Tampa united in a monster petition to the Florida Legislature to pass a child labor law, to prevent the further spread of the system. This was not only humane but intelligent from the commercial stand-point, as the employment of children always tends to bring down the scale of wages from the adult standard to the child standard.

Another child-employing industry on the Gulf Coast is that of oyster-packing, and this industry shows, in rather an unique way, how the social legislation of one state may affect others. The workers in these oyster-packing establishments are mainly Bohemians, brought from Maryland for the oyster season. Maryland has a poor child labor law, with a twelve year age-limit, and the counties are exempted from the operation of the law from June 1 to October 15. This means that children under twelve

years may be employed in the canneries, fruit and vegetable. Here are to be found in great numbers these Bohemians with all the children at work who are large enough to add their pittance to the family wage. Then, when the canning season is over they are induced by the agents of the oyster-packers to move to the Gulf Coast, where the children can also be employed in shucking oysters. I have seen children as young as eight and ten years of age, cutting the steamed oysters out of the shells, and with amazing facility. Thus the chief opponent of a child labor law for Florida and of any advance in child labor legislation is an oyster packer from Appalachicola. Meantime, the poor little Bohemian children have a poor chance at an education between migrations.

One other industry that employs far too many children is the coal mine. The evil is a grave one in West Virginia. It has apparently been checked by better law enforcement, in the recent past, in Kentucky. The mine inspector of Tennessee makes no mention in a series of reports, of the employment of children, except by way of describing certain occupations. It is reported that there are a considerable number of children in the mines in this state. In Alabama, my information is that the use of convict labor in the mines has largely precluded the employment of children. But in Oklahoma, since the passage of the recent child labor law, several hundred children have been dismissed from employment in the mines.

So much for the occupations that are the chief employers of children, outside of agriculture and domestic service, in the southern states. As to the number of children employed at the present time, it is impossible to do more than make an estimate from the figures given by the census of 1900, and the census of 1910 should soon give us exact information. The census bulletins of manufactures, issued in 1905, are utterly unreliable when it comes to the number of the children employed. For example one reports for the State of Florida, nineteen children, under sixteen, in the cigar factories. I saw twenty-five children, the same year, at work in one factory out of the many in Tampa. No one would accept, without corroboration, the estimate of a cotton-mill manager, known to be violating the laws of his state, as to the number of children employed. An aggregate of such estimates embodied in a census bulletin is of no more worth. Neither are

there state records of any value. Bureaus of labor have not as yet been generally established, and the departments of factory inspection have not undertaken a complete census of the working children of the state, with the exception of that of South Carolina, which has not yet been made public.

The Bureau of Labor for North Carolina, under a former chief, has some suggestive features, but it seems to have been employed in recent years for the purpose rather of concealing than of revealing the real number of the children. A study of it may be of some value as indicating the number of children employed in the cotton manufacturing states, namely the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama.

The report for 1900 showed 7,598 children at work in the textile factories, under fourteen years of age; for 1901, 7,996. Then began the agitation for a child labor law which was successful in 1903. After 1901 the form of the question was changed and 929 children were reported under twelve years of age, only about two-thirds of the mills replying to this question, so that we might count 1,200 children under twelve, at least, according to the manufacturers' own reports, supposing all of them to have answered the question. After 1903 even this question was omitted. In 1904 the total number of operatives is given, as 57,555, male and female over twelve, and 309 are marked "Unclassified." It is a singular fact, that in spite of the law forbidding the employment of children under twelve, some of the manufacturers report a total number of operatives considerably in excess of the total for males and females over twelve years of age. But in the meantime, the number of employees, for 1904, 57,555 is the highest number that has yet been reached. As there was an inappreciable number of children dismissed from the factories in 1903, on account of the passage of the child labor law of that year, and investigations of the factories have demonstrated the wholesale employment of children under the legal age, while there has been a great exhaustion of the industry itself, the falling off of several thousand operatives from the reports would indicate the dropping of a number from the pay-rolls, who are still employed in the mills as "helpers," one of the most frequent evasions of the law.

From the report of the North Carolina Bureau for 1908 we gather the following facts: Miscellaneous factories, to the number

of 555, with an authorized capital of \$42,410,000, employing 30,000 persons, report an inappreciable number of children employed. Eighty-three per cent oppose and only eight per cent favor the employment of children under fourteen. Seventy-seven furniture factories oppose the labor of children under fourteen and eight favor it. But the form of the question was changed for the textile mills, and although in the meantime the age-limit had been raised to thirteen, 248 of these factories oppose the labor of children under twelve, while twelve favor even that. Some of the answers given in full are illuminating, if not enlightened: "I think children, especially boys ten years of age, should be allowed to work in mills." "Any child ten years old who attends school four months in each year, should be free to work the balance of the time anywhere else."

Others favor the raising of the age-limit to fourteen, the enforcement of the law, and the prohibition of night work for all women, and for boys over sixteen years of age, together with a shortening of the hours from sixty-six, the present legal standard, to sixty. But a representative lobby of cotton-mill men succeeded in defeating the bill before the recent legislature, which attempted to embody these ideas. With the thirteen year age-limit, one manufacturer writes: "I know absolutely that numbers of mills are employing children under twelve years old."

In South Carolina, the census of 1900 reported 8,049 children, ten to fifteen years of age at work in the cotton mills alone, thirty per cent of the whole number of operatives. Of these, 2,000 were between ten and twelve and there were in addition, 419 under ten. The number of operatives for 1909 has about doubled. Within the last six months, 1,500 children under twelve, who were illegally employed, have been dismissed from the mills by the new factory inspection department. That does not include the number under twelve who are legally employed, so that the number of children under twelve, at work six months ago, was probably larger than in 1900. But the child labor law must have had some deterrent effect, to say nothing of the greater pressure of public opinion. Let us hope that as many children under age were excluded from the mills, by the manufacturers as were employed. This would indicate very nearly twice as many children under sixteen, to corres-

pond to the increased number of operatives, as in 1900, say 16,000 in one industry in one state.

Legislation and Law Enforcement

The present status on the legislative side is at least encouraging. Since 1900 every southern state has either passed its first child labor law or has amended an old law in the right direction, or both. In Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, the fourteen year age-limit has been reached, Oklahoma, having an eight hour day for children under sixteen, Kentucky a nine hour day, and the others a ten hour day. In all these states except Arkansas there is factory inspection, especially effective in Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Louisiana. Maryland, West Virginia, where the employment of children in the glass-works is a great evil, Florida and Texas, retain the twelve year age-limit, with a sixteen year limit for mines in Texas, but the prospects for a more advanced standard are bright in all these states, in the absence of the organized opposition of the cotton mills. There remain the cotton mill states, North and South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama, to which may be added Mississippi, which, though it has but a score of cotton mills, is so pre-eminently a rural state that the cotton mill is its most conspicuous manufacturing industry.

In these states the age-limit remains at twelve, except in North Carolina, which has reached the thirteen year standard. But North Carolina, as does Georgia, retains the inhuman sixty-six hour week, which means a twelve hour day for the first five working days of the week, and North Carolina reports fifty-four mills doing night work, the age limit for night work being fourteen, while South Carolina reports ten such mills, though children under twelve years of age are not allowed to work later than eight p. m. South Carolina allows children of any age to work in the mills if they are the children of dependent parents, or are orphans, and these children are allowed to work as late as nine p. m. South Carolina had adopted a sixty hour week "or ten hours a day," but the last legislature allowed the manufacturers to go back to the eleven hour day, though retaining the sixty hour week.

Georgia also allows children as young as ten to work in the mills if they are orphans or the children of dependent parents. But it

has an age-limit of fourteen for illiterate children and requires children to attend school each year until they are eighteen as a condition of working in the factories the following year. Alabama makes such a requirement for children under sixteen, it has a straight twelve year age-limit, with no exceptions, forbids night work for children under sixteen and limits the hours of night work to eight, for those between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Alabama also has a sixty hour week. Mississippi has a fifty-eight hour week.

It is in these last-named states that the longest and hardest fight for the rights of the children may be expected, and the reason is the importance of the cotton mill interests. The same reason has left New England behind such great manufacturing states as New York, Ohio, and Illinois, with an eight hour day for children. These states are lacking in cotton mills. Massachusetts and Rhode Island have just reached the fifty-six hour week, the other New England states with Pennsylvania have a fifty-eight hour week for the working children.

As to law enforcement, neither North Carolina nor Georgia have the semblance of factory inspection. The violations of the law are open and shameless and innumerable, as proved by recent photographic investigations. Alabama has created a department for the inspection of jails, factories and alms-houses, with one inspector and one assistant. But on account of the illness of the present inspector and of his predecessor, very little has been done. The most hopeful sign of an end of child labor in the southern cotton mills is the activity of the factory inspection department in South Carolina. Commissioner Watson has two efficient inspectors under his direction. It is to be hoped that his work will not alienate the support of the cotton mill interests which he has formerly enjoyed.

Against the organized opposition of the cotton mills to a standard child labor law and the earnest enforcement of its provisions, there is on the other hand a gathering force of public opinion, to which the manufacturers are growing gratifyingly sensitive, which legislators will not be slow to obey. For reasons that have been often stated, only the white native children of the South are employed in the mills. They make a peculiar and effective appeal for protection at the hands of the state. The argument in their behalf has already been stated and is well understood. For if the child labor system, in anything like its present proportions, should con-

tinue, as it continued for a hundred years in England, with operatives of the same racial stock, we may look for the same consequences as inevitably following, namely, racial degeneracy, perpetuated poverty, the enlargement of illiteracy, the destruction of democracy, the disintegration of the family, the increase of crime, the lowering of the wage-scale and the swelling of the army of the unemployed.